



**Coming
out.**

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I'M COMING OUT

In an ideal world, LGBT+ people wouldn't need to come out.

Society would accept that everyone is different and that there is no such thing as “normal”, and your sexuality would be as interesting as your eye colour (i.e. not very). Unfortunately, we don't live in that kind of world (yet), so people assume you're straight or cisgender unless you tell them otherwise. And they expect you declare who you fancy, even though it's nobody's business. Humans are weird.

If you're reading this, you probably know and accept that you're not straight. CONGRATULATIONS! This is a massive step and I want you to know that I am here with party poppers, celebrating that achievement for you, because coming out to *yourself* is the biggest challenge and now that part is behind you.

You inspire me!

First things first – YOU DON'T NEED TO COME OUT RIGHT NOW. You can do it whenever and however you want. Tell one person, tell loads of people, tell your dog, organize a flashmob, write a letter, draw it in the sand, send a text message, write a song. There are countless ways

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come out
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to do it and none of them are wrong. This is your story to tell and you can take as much time as you want with it.

I wish I could give you a step-by-step guide to coming out, but I can't, because everyone's situation is different. For some people, coming out is dangerous: there are many countries around the world where being gay is still illegal, and many religions teach that being gay is a sin. But if you're reading this, you probably live in a place where it's okay to be gay. You might think your family will react really badly, or maybe you don't think they'll mind at all. But even if your parents go on pride marches and watch *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* on repeat, coming out is still

one of the scariest things you'll ever do. Coming out takes courage, but one thing is for sure: it'll change your life for the better, forever.

The likelihood is that you WILL NOT need to worry about the

THINGS to CONSIDER before you make that jump into a life of openness and freedom.

Have I heard my family members express homophobic views, or do I have any LGBT+ relatives who experienced a bad reaction when they came out?

If so, you might want to wait until you know you can support yourself independently before you come out to them. That doesn't mean you have to keep your sexuality a secret from everyone, though – you can still tell your friends, as long as you know it won't get back to your family. If you don't know what your parents think about LGBT+ people, try telling them about a fake person at school or university who has just come out, and see what they say.

things to consider I've listed below. Your family might weep a little, hug you a lot, and throw you a big gay party. But having an understanding of your situation and how you can react to different outcomes will allow you to breathe a little easier during this transformative process.

Alex from The Netherlands told me about the joy of being out to his friends:

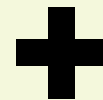
“During the week, I'm at university, so I can do whatever I want and basically be myself. But at the weekend, when I come back home, I have to behave like another person, that person I was pretending to be all those years when I was growing up. I really, really, really feel better now that I can be a hundred percent myself with my friends.”

Do I have somewhere to stay in case I need time away from my immediate family?

It's very unlikely you'll need to, but it's a good idea to check you can stay with a friend or a family member just in case.

Is there an LGBT+ youth centre near me?

It's great to have a support network ready just in case. There are organizations that can provide emergency help and advice if you need it.



Turn to the Useful Contacts section at the back of this book for a list of useful organizations.



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YOUR COMING-OUT GUINEA PIG

**Before you come out,
think about the first
person you should tell.**

Think of them as your own personal coming-out guinea pig. It could be one of your closest friends, your favourite aunt, that teacher who just gets you, or anyone else who you feel happy and safe around. They should be someone you can trust to keep the news to themselves – someone who's likely to support you on this wonderful journey.

I didn't make it easy for myself – I decided to tell my closest three girlfriends AT THE SAME TIME! I told them all to meet me during our school lunchbreak for “some news”. I was always so bloody dramatic. I was trembling from head to toe because I had never said the words aloud before. At that time, I believed I was bisexual – I was afraid of committing to being 100% gay in case I wanted to be with a girl one day. I thank heteronormative social conditioning for that!

The girls and I walked around the school building over and over until I finally plucked up the courage to look at them in the eye and say, “I'm bi.” They didn't even blink. One gave me a hug, and the others said they were totally fine about it. We talked about how long I had known, and the school day went on as though I had just told them I was going to get highlights in my hair at the weekend. (I told them that too, in fairness.) I didn't get the massive fireworks or screaming biphobia I had expected. In a way, I was disappointed by how much of a non-event it was!

Although I trusted and loved these girls – I still do – before I knew it, my secret had spread through the 800 students at my school like homosexual wild-fire. Everyone seemed to know within a matter of days. It felt IDENTICAL to that scene in

Telling a group in the early stages can leave you open to gossip – everyone loves to talk, and there's no gossip quite like someone coming out at school.

Love, Simon when Simon walks into school the day after he is outed online. I felt like everyone was looking at me and talking about me, and that things were moving in slow motion. I was upset that I didn't get to tell everyone myself, but I was also relieved that I didn't have to.

I'm not telling you this to freak you out, but to encourage you to tell one person at a time. Telling a group in the early stages can leave you open to gossip – everyone loves to talk, and there's no gossip quite like someone coming out at school. People need a hobby, I swear.

Trevor from Boston told me about the amazing friend he had by his side when he was coming out:

“I knew I needed help, but I was too afraid and ashamed to talk to anyone. But one day, my best friend came to me and said, ‘Are you OK? Because I know there's something wrong. Please, just tell me.’ I told her everything, and I was so relieved. It's amazing how powerful simple words can be. Talking to someone is probably one of the most effective medicines. And I think everyone has the right to be listened to. Since then, my life has completely changed, and I'm so grateful to that girl. She was the only one who tried to help me, and still helps me now, whenever I feel low or when I'm paralyzed by anxiety.

Coming out is hard – it's a journey into the unknown. But remember, even though you may not be able to see us just yet, you have a family of hundreds of millions of people around the world who are silently cheering you on.

We are here for you.

We are waiting for you!

MY COMING OUT STORY

Writing this book has been a difficult but hugely rewarding process for me.

I want to give you the most unfiltered and honest advice I can, but to do that I've had to drag myself back to some of the most upsetting moments of my life – moments that almost broke me, but that helped me grow into the person I am today. Nothing encapsulates that combination of pain and triumph more than my coming out story. It shows how things can go from worst-case scenario to best-case scenario with time, love and understanding.

After four years of keeping my sexuality to myself, the secret was consuming me. It felt like a pot of water that was bubbling violently, higher and higher. I was terrified of coming out, but I felt I was losing control, and that the words "I'M GAY!" were ready to come flying out at any random person. Why now? Why me? I wanted it to go away. Plus I was a young red-blooded male, so I was a thundering ball of frustrated libido. Something as vanilla as a topless guy in a TV advert would leave me with a beating heart, wide eyes and a semi in my pants. Not ideal when you're watching *Coronation Street* with your parents!

I started watching porn on the family computer whenever the house was empty. One day I made the error of leaving the browser window open on one of the sites ... You can imagine what happened next, right?



I'm
gay.

I left the house and my mom went to use the computer. To her shock she was greeted with page after page of soft-core gay porn. To her it was obvious who had been looking at this stuff – she ruled my outrageously heterosexual father and little brother out.

Later that night she came to me as I sat alone in the kitchen and said, “Riyadh, is there something you’d like to tell me? You know you can say anything to me.” My mind began to race – I was trying to think of something she might be alluding to, apart from my sexuality. ANYTHING. But I couldn’t. My heart sank and I put my head in my hands. I was filled with a suffocating wave of fear, shame and embarrassment. My cover was blown, but I still didn’t fully love myself, so it was almost impossible for me to say “Yes. I’m gay.”

Mom kept trying to get my attention but I was afraid to let her look into my eyes – eyes that she had been able to read like a book since the day I was born. After three hours of crying, I eventually turned my puffy, tear-covered face towards her. She looked into my eyes and instantly knew her hunch was correct. At the time, I told her that I was bisexual. As I’ve said, I thought there was a chance I might want to be with a woman one day. I was wrong.

Over the following months, I felt lighter, happier and more “me” than I had for years. I soon found myself exclusively attracted to guys. Sorry ladies. I just flowed with my feelings and didn’t resist. Mom and I would look at guys walking down the street as we drove in the car together. She would occasionally gesture to a hottie and ask, “Would you?” And I would reply “ABSOLUTELY!”. We grew closer than ever before. She knew I had been through years of silent struggles and pain, so now she was doing everything she could to normalize my feelings, to validate me and to help me feel safe. There was one problem though...

We both knew the news of my homosexuality was likely to hit my dad hard. He was an Iraqi-born man’s man who owned a mechanics garage and loved watching football and boxing. I mean, you get the picture, right? Coming out to him was a terrifying prospect. I already felt I had let him down time after time by not wanting to learn karate, by dressing in my mother’s clothes, by having limp wrists and an

effeminate voice. Was this news going to push him over the edge?

In the nine months after I came out to Mom, I drifted further and further away from Dad. I now realize I was subconsciously detaching myself from him – I had predicted what his reaction to my news would be and I was trying to protect myself. I would leave the room when he walked in, I’d only speak to him when I had to, and I would disregard and contradict anything he said. To Dad I was just a moody teenager, but in reality I was punishing him in advance for the way I knew he was going to make me feel when he learned who I really was.

SUPER DRAMATIC THINGS

I thought would happen when Dad found out:

- I'd be kicked out of the house and become homeless
- I'd be “honour killed” in my sleep
- I'd be forced into an arranged marriage with a woman
- I'd be sent for gay conversion therapy
- I'd be abandoned by my father forever
- I'd be physically beaten by my father or someone else.

One night, after an argument with my dad, I grabbed my jacket, swore at my parents and ran into the night, alone. I wanted to get away from that house, from him and from my own fears and shame. But I also wanted Dad to need me. He chased after me that night, and I felt a strange sort of comfort. He still loved me and wanted me as his son, if though I knew that might change when he found out I was gay. Growing up gay in a straight boy's world can make you CRAZY.

And then one day, over dinner, my mom said: "Riyadh, I think it's time for you to tell your dad something." Had I heard her correctly?? I started to panic, and said, "Shut up, Mom! Shut up!" But Mom kept pushing, and I realized it was now or never.

I tried to form the words to tell Dad the truth, but my mouth wouldn't open. So I picked up a school book that was lying on the table, tore out the back page and wrote the words "I'm gay". Through tears, I slid the page over to my dad.

There was a pause that seemed to last a lifetime. And then he gave me a loose hug and said, in an unsure voice, "Everything will be okay". After that, he locked himself in the bathroom for an hour.

The following days were tough. Dad seemed like a zombie. He would float in and out of the house expressionless, without saying a word to any of us. He'd always had this knowing, caring, magical glint in his eye when he looked at me. It's hard to describe, but it was full of love and pride. Now, that glint was gone.

After a week or so, my mom started to worry about him. She asked me to talk to him. Reluctantly, I took a beer out to him in the garden and asked if he was okay. He didn't answer. I lost my temper. I told him I was normal and that I was still his son. I said I had always been gay and that I would love to bring a boyfriend home to meet him one day. That's when things really went downhill.

Dad dropped to his knees and began to cry. "Why you?" he said. "Why do you have to be gay? It's not right!" I couldn't believe what I was seeing – the man I loved most in the world, the man who had taught me what was right and wrong, the man I saw as my beacon of strength was on the ground at my feet, broken and weeping. What made it worse was that I had broken him and I didn't know how to make it better. I wasn't going to change, because I knew I couldn't change.

But over the following months, things began to get better. I gave Dad space to breathe, to get used to having a gay son and to realize that I was the EXACT same person that I had been before. He spoke to other fathers of gay sons about their experiences and how they coped. He listened to my mother when she pointed out that he cared about his family more than anything in the world. He began to communicate with me again. We laughed at the TV together, he made light-hearted jokes again, and the father I knew and loved came back into my life. After about a year, the loving glint returned to his eyes when he looked at me. He started to hug and kiss me again. He even became interested in LGBT+ equality. WHAT? YES!

It's been a decade since the night Dad fell to his knees. He's now an activist who fights for the rights of LGBT+ people alongside me and my mom. He has been to gay music festivals, he's friends with drag queens, he has marched in countless pride events, he has spoken about his experience as a father of a gay man on TV and radio shows, he campaigned for same-sex marriage in Ireland and held my hand as we watched the results of the vote being read out, he has welcomed my boyfriends into our home and he supports me in everything I do.

My story has a happy ending because my parents decided that it was their duty to put love above shame, even though that took effort, conscious learning and bucket loads of love.

WHAT IF YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS AREN'T SUPPORTIVE?

Wouldn't it be great if we lived in a world where this chapter wasn't necessary?

Where you could scream, "I'M A HOMO" at your school assembly and everyone would say, "Who cares? Sit down, you fool!" Unfortunately, we're not at that place just yet. When you come out, some people might react in a less than ideal way. Sometimes they'll just need time to get used to it. Sometimes you'll be able to educate them and win them over. But occasionally you might need to walk away.

ALMOST EVERY RELATIONSHIP IS SALVAGEABLE.

Some people are shocked when you come out because it changes their preconceived opinion of you. They might have imagined being a guest at your big, straight wedding. Now you've come along and ruined that. How selfish of you! The news that you're queer hits them like a tsunami. they feel confused, sad, panicky. What? Why? How? When?!

Know that this initial reaction may not be how they'll feel in the long term. Just look at my dad – he went from terrified and confused to loving and accepting in a matter of months, because he and I both took steps to restore our relationship. All you can do is be honest and open to questions, no matter how silly or hurtful they may seem.

WHAT IF THEY START TELLING ME I'M CONFUSED?

Confusion is a funny word. It's perfect for describing how you feel about long division, or the fact that you lose a single sock in every wash cycle. But if you have reached the point of coming out, you're probably not confused about your sexuality or gender identity any more. You've spent months or years agonizing over your thoughts and feelings. No one else can tell you how you feel. When you're hit with the "You must be confused" card, the best thing to do is calmly and assertively explain how confident you are about your sexuality or gender identity. Even if you're still questioning certain things, don't let that deter you. Describe the journey you've been on to bring you to this point. Even if that story takes hours, ask your friends or family to listen to you. Answer their questions. Challenge them, gently. Thrash it out a little.

Jason from Arizona remembers the difficult conversation he had with his grandmother:

"When I told her I was gay, she dismissed it as 'just a phase' and rolled her eyes. I felt like the years of figuring myself out were for nothing. A few days later I sat her down and asked if she had chosen her sexuality and to be attracted to Grandpa. She said no, but that the way she felt was 'normal'. I told her my feelings were normal too, and that being with a girl would be the most abnormal thing in the world. She didn't instantly come around, but I could tell she had heard me. Instead of fighting the news, she began asking questions and I was happy to slowly teach her."

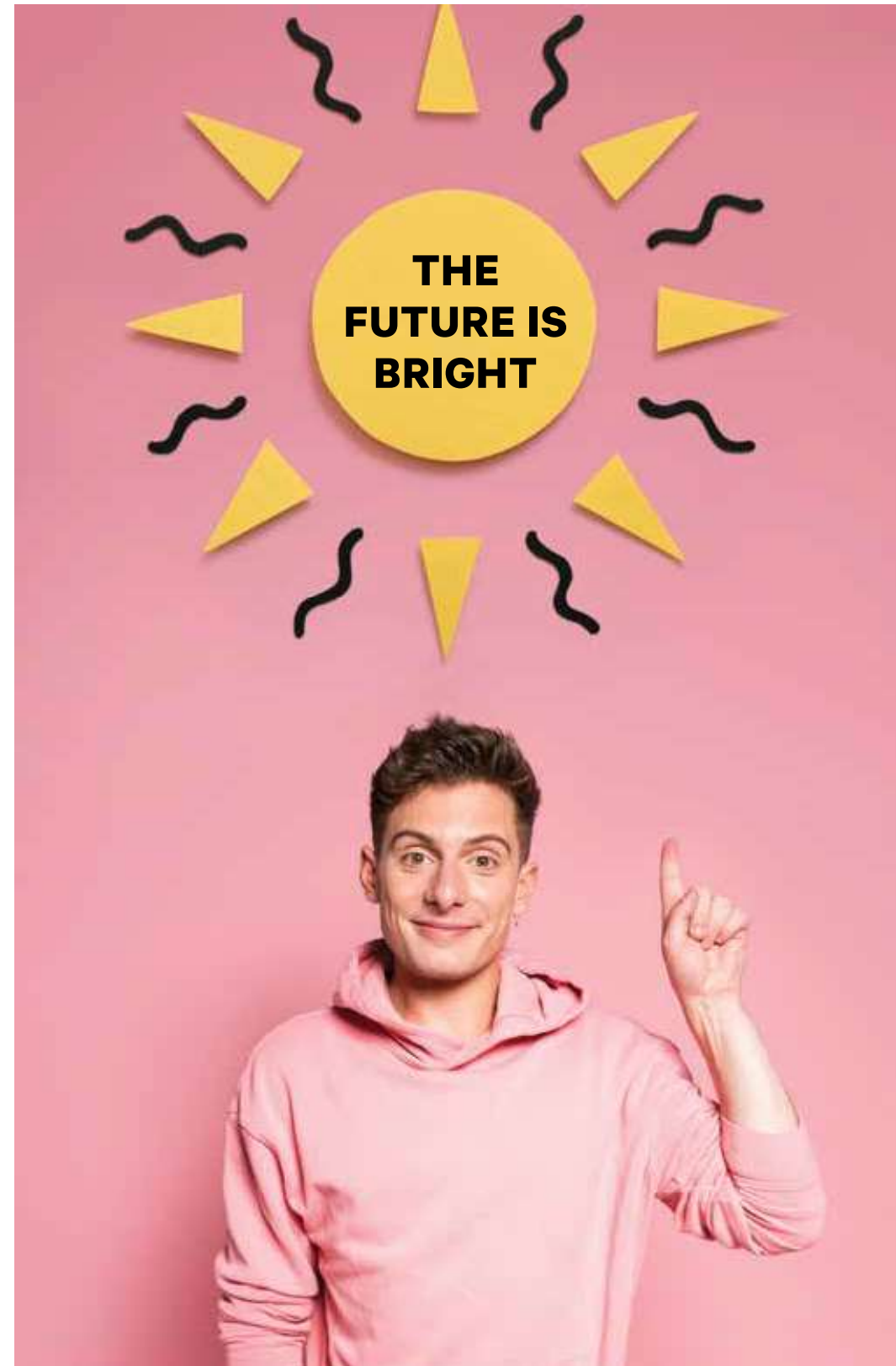
In intense emotional situations, some people's natural reaction is to lash out in **anger**. You do not deserve to be treated badly. Be assertive and clear, but don't react to anger with anger. If you shout back, raise your voice or say hurtful things in retaliation, the situation might escalate. You might feel betrayed and hurt if someone reacts badly to your coming out, but remember, they may feel hurt and confused too.

If at any point you feel like your mental or physical health is in danger, reach out for help. Maybe there's a family member or friend you could stay with, or you could call an organization set up to care for LGBT+ young people like you. That might seem like a drastic move, but sometimes both sides can benefit from breathing space.

Remember: **You are not alone**. There are people waiting to help you in person, on the phone or online. Speaking to someone who understands your struggle is vital during a difficult time like this. Reach out to one of the organizations I've listed in the Help is Out There section of this book. You won't regret it.

There was a time when I believed coming out could land me on the streets, homeless. Thankfully that didn't happen because I had a supportive family and friends. Around a quarter of homeless people in the UK identify as LGBT+. You don't have to be part of that statistic. I have met many queer teens who were kicked out of home by parents who didn't support them but have since gone on to find a home, start amazing careers, make friends, fall in love and find happiness. No matter what happens, support is there for you and the future is bright.

Coming out is the first step towards a life where you get to be you, without acting or editing. Do it in your own time, do it with a plan in place in case things go wrong, and do it with your community by your side. We're cheering you on!



BEING THE ODD ONE OUT

Different. Bizarre. Weird. Original. Distinctive. Offbeat.



These all sound like great personality traits, don't they? The sort of qualities you look for in someone you'd like to be mates with, right? The problem is, when you're young, most people don't want to be different or weird or original. Most people want to fit in because offbeat people sometimes get laughed at. Teenagers are so judgemental!

Being gay instantly puts you into a minority – a wonderful minority, sure, but it automatically separates you from the mainstream. That's just a fact of life.

Just after I'd burst out of the closet, I wanted to talk about being gay all the time. I draped myself in rainbow-coloured clothes and I was practically singing musical theatre numbers in my sleep. Lots of baby gays do this – it's a rite of passage, really. But a by-product of this newfound freedom was that I found myself being "othered" over and over by my family, friends and just about anyone else who knew me. By "othered" I mean I was made to feel like the odd one out. Were they doing it in a fun and friendly way? Probably. But to me, I knew this was a new normal that I was going to have to get used to.

For example, I was at a local barbecue when my mother's best friend welcomed me with a hug and twirled me around by my hand, saying

I looked “FAAAABULOUS darling!” And I was at Christmas dinner and my aunt made a joke that I wouldn’t be able to open the jar of cranberry sauce (because the stereotype is that gay men are weak and effeminate). I think they were trying to show me that they were comfortable with my sexuality, but they were stereotyping me, and I soon grew tired of it. It made me feel like a one-dimensional homosexual character in a bad sitcom who’s only there for light relief and cheap entertainment. I knew I had more to offer. I had interests, I had passions, I had opinions, I was more than my sexuality.

Since then, I’ve figured out ways to deal with the moments when I’m being “othered” by people who (mostly) mean well. I think these examples may come in handy for you, too, so here goes:

Generally, I laugh, smile and engage with the joke. Then I change the subject – “Oh how’s the new job going?” “Are you going on holiday this summer?” I sometimes ask the person a deep and meaningful question and make it clear that I am interested in more than small talk (we all hate small talk, let’s be honest!) or I might call them out on it, with a smile: “Wow, you’re stereotyping me aren’t you?”

It’s also helpful to watch your own behaviour and make sure you’re not othering *yourself* (unless you want to, of course!). Some gay people have a habit of making fun of themselves, getting in there first before anyone else can – that can be a result of being bullied when you were younger. But you’re more than you’re sexuality, and you deserve for other people to realize that, although you’re proud of being gay, it doesn’t define you. As you get older, people will start to think your sexuality is less of a big deal. Believe me, people will be SO disinterested in your gayness that you may begin to miss the attention!

Being the odd one out can seem like a negative at first, but as you get older, your sexuality will be the least interesting thing about you.

And one day you’ll see that being special is often an advantage. Who wants to be the same as everyone else? Be proud of everything that makes you different!

Jake in Connecticut told me how he used the fact that he was the odd one out to his advantage:

“I was working at the perfume counter in my local mall. It was fun, but I really wanted to become an assistant manager in women’s wear. I knew there were at least five other people going for this job so I had my work cut out for me.

I had done my research on the woman who interviewed me, and I found out that her best friend was a super camp gay dude who would come into the store and laugh with her by the customer service desk. This was my opportunity. I needed to let my gayness shine bright like a diamond!

Interview day came along, and I marched into that room with a big smile on my face and said, “Hey hun! Looking fab today”. She smiled at me over her glasses and we began chatting about the role. When we were coming to the end of the interview, I mentioned that my boyfriend was cooking me dinner that night and I was preparing an outfit for Pride the following week. We ended up chatting nonsense and laughing about how bad our local gay bar is, and she offered me the job on the spot!

Do I feel bad that I used my sexuality to my favour? Not really! It felt like repayment for the years of hiding and changing myself for the benefit of other people. For the first time in my life, being the different one, the gay one, put me above the rest and got me the job I so badly wanted. I think I deserved it, to be honest.”

BULLIES AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

“Things will get easier, people’s minds will change, and you should be alive to see it.” —Ellen DeGeneres

Bullies come in all shapes and sizes, with varying levels of aggression and different motivations for being awful to you or others. The one thing that’s true for almost all bullies is that they have some underlying insecurity that they’re desperately trying to hide, deflect attention from or ignore.

Understanding that not all bullies are inherently bad people is difficult. I mean, why would you smile at someone screaming “faggot” in your face? Why would you speak positively about a person who hit you for wearing a pink t-shirt? But if you take time to see the human emotions behind a bully’s actions, you’ll allow yourself to disconnect from the awful words and actions coming your way. Bullying feels personal, it feels malicious, it feels humiliating, but it’s not about you, and it’s not your fault. It’s about the bully.

Understanding that not all bullies are inherently bad people is difficult.



Why do people bully others?

- Family problems
- Issues with anger management
- Internalized homophobia (they're scared of queer people because they're scared they might be queer)
- As an outlet for trauma or anger in another part of their life
- For attention
- Sheep behaviour (they're bullying because everyone else is doing it)
- They're bored
- They think it's funny and that you're in on the joke (they don't realize they're bullying you)
- They scared of people who are different from them.

Why me?!

You can become a bully's unlucky target for a number of reasons. In the war zone that is school, where hormones are gushing and everyone is desperately trying to fit in, any perceived difference in you is likely to be a gay rag to a homophobic bull!

A study carried out by anti-bullying organization Ditch The Label found that almost half of UK school students had experienced some kind of bullying but that only 14% felt that they had bullied someone in the past. These findings suggest that most bullies aren't aware that they are causing harm. They may feel they are just "having a laugh" at your expense. This is not okay. You deserve to feel happy, safe and comfortable in your skin wherever you are, especially in a place like school.

Again, if you're being bullied, IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT.

How can I stop it?

TALK TO YOUR BULLY

Tell them how they are making you feel, ask them why they are doing it and that you'd like them to stop. Remember, your bully is probably going through some difficult stuff in their life, too .

If your bully is likely to be violent, then avoid being alone with them.

ASK FOR HELP

The people who care about you most will want to protect you, but they can't do anything unless they know something is wrong. Find a teacher, family member or friend who you trust and tell them how the bullying is affecting you and that you need some help.

Tell your friends that if they see you being bullied they need to step in and ask the bully to stop – that's the true definition of safety in numbers!

IMPORTANT! Although it may seem like the safe option, try not to change who you are, how you walk, how you talk or how you dress to try and avoid being bullied. Faking it to fit in will only make you feel empty and unfulfilled. It's better to be yourself and make sure the bullying is monitored and stopped by your school, parents or friends.

Use common sense in certain situations where you may be alone or around a group of dangerous people. In this case keep yourself to yourself, don't provoke them and get away from them as quietly and quickly as you can.

WALK AWAY

Walk away – not just physically, but also emotionally. Actively try and practise letting hurtful words wash over you like water off a fabulous waterproof raincoat. Resist reacting when the bully targets you. They are trying to get a rise out of you. This reaction feeds them and may make the situation worse. If you ignore the bully and removing yourself from the situation, they might end up feeling silly and as if they have wasted their time and energy. They'll be less likely to pick on you again.

My all-time favourite response is to wait until they are done being nasty, leave a slight pause, and then crack a knowing smile and say, "Thank you, are you done now?". Your maturity and calmness may just rub off on them!

What to do about cyberbullying

There are loads of benefits to growing up in the digital age – you get to Facetime friends on the other side of the planet, stream endless episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and stalk your crush on Instagram, imagining kissing his soft lips on a beach in Malibu while Miley Cyrus plays in the background and the sea mist caresses your faces... Oh, just me? Okay.

But most good things have a dark side. I'm talking about cyberbullying. It's probably the worst kind of emotional abuse because it follows you everywhere and can pop up at any time, day or night.

I was 16 when I first experienced cyberbullying. Every day, people left tormenting messages on my YouTube videos.

"Shut up, you disgusting fag."

"I know where you live. I'm going to get you."

I was young, new to the internet and afraid, and these bullies drove

CYBERBULLYING TOP TIPS:

- Take screenshots of the messages, images or videos
- Don't respond to them
- Block the bully's account
- Report the harassment on their account
- Speak to a family member, friend, or teacher about it
- Reach out to one of the anti-bullying organizations listed at the back of this book.



me off YouTube for seven years. The site had given me a voice, a place to express my creativity, a place I could meet people like me. But those keyboard warriors silenced me with intimidation. In reality, they didn't know where I lived, they weren't going to get me, and calling me a fag means nothing. It's just a word. It hurt, yes, but I knew deep down that I was a good person and that I was surrounded by people who loved me. It took many years of learning how to love myself, my gayness, my voice and all the things the trolls hated about me to finally NOT CARE. I now care so little that I

use mean comments in videos for a giggle with my friends or parents.

Your haters, your bullies, your trolls do not define you. Their words aren't about you, their actions are not motivated by you and if they're targeting of you, it's not your fault. When you're being bullied, it can feel like there's no way out and that nobody wants to help. But that's not true. Speak up and reach out for help, and you'll get it. Things get better, bullies lose interest, people move schools and with age even the most awful bullies grow out of their terrible behaviour. As my mother always told me when things were overwhelming – "This too shall pass".

SEXUALITY AND FAITH

“Can god really love me if I’m gay?”

This is a question that plagues lots of LGBT+ people of faith and their families. It’s a worry that leads to people living secret double lives, seeking damaging gay conversion therapy and at times, being excommunicated from their family and church. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

A couple of years ago, I made a documentary series called *Queer Britain* for the BBC (which you can watch on the BBC Three YouTube channel). During filming, I had the opportunity to meet queer people who identify as Muslim, Christian, Jehovah’s Witness and Sikh. Almost all of them felt a close connection to their faith, yet struggled to find a harmonious way to live an authentic faith-led life that allowed them to express their sexuality without shame.

Elijah is one of the people I interviewed on *Queer Britain*. He’s a Christian pansexual trans man who struggled to reconcile his faith with his sexuality and gender identity but he eventually found a church who embraced him for who he is.

“I had the feeling that I was somehow wrong or that I was a bit gross. I felt isolated and sad all the time. But the knowledge that

there was a power that loved me, no matter what I did or who I was, actually saved my life. The church that I'm part of now practises what they preached in terms of solidarity with the LGBT+ community, so I always felt safe."

What Elijah found in his congregation is special but not totally unusual. There are faith groups all over the world that open their arms to the LGBT+ community.

When I joined Elijah at his church I could feel a tangible warmth and togetherness from people of all ages and backgrounds. As Elijah went through his naming ceremony, where he officially declared his new identity as a man before his god, I was blown away with how the church embraced him. The congregation gave him a standing ovation, cheering, clapping, hugging him and offering him endless encouragement. As a former Irish Catholic, this was something I had never experienced and it brought me to tears.

Soon after I came out, Dad dropped Islam, and Mom and I dropped Catholicism. We turned to Humanism, the belief that people, love and science are the centre of the universe. Why? At the time we thought it would be hypocritical to follow faiths that seemed, for the most part, to be anti-LGBT+. But since then I've learned a thing or two..

Sure, we might be told that the dude in the sky doesn't like gay people, but what we forget is that it's not god telling us this – it's other people. A faith is a personal connection with something greater than you. Of course this can be celebrated, learned and expressed as a group, but it starts with YOU.

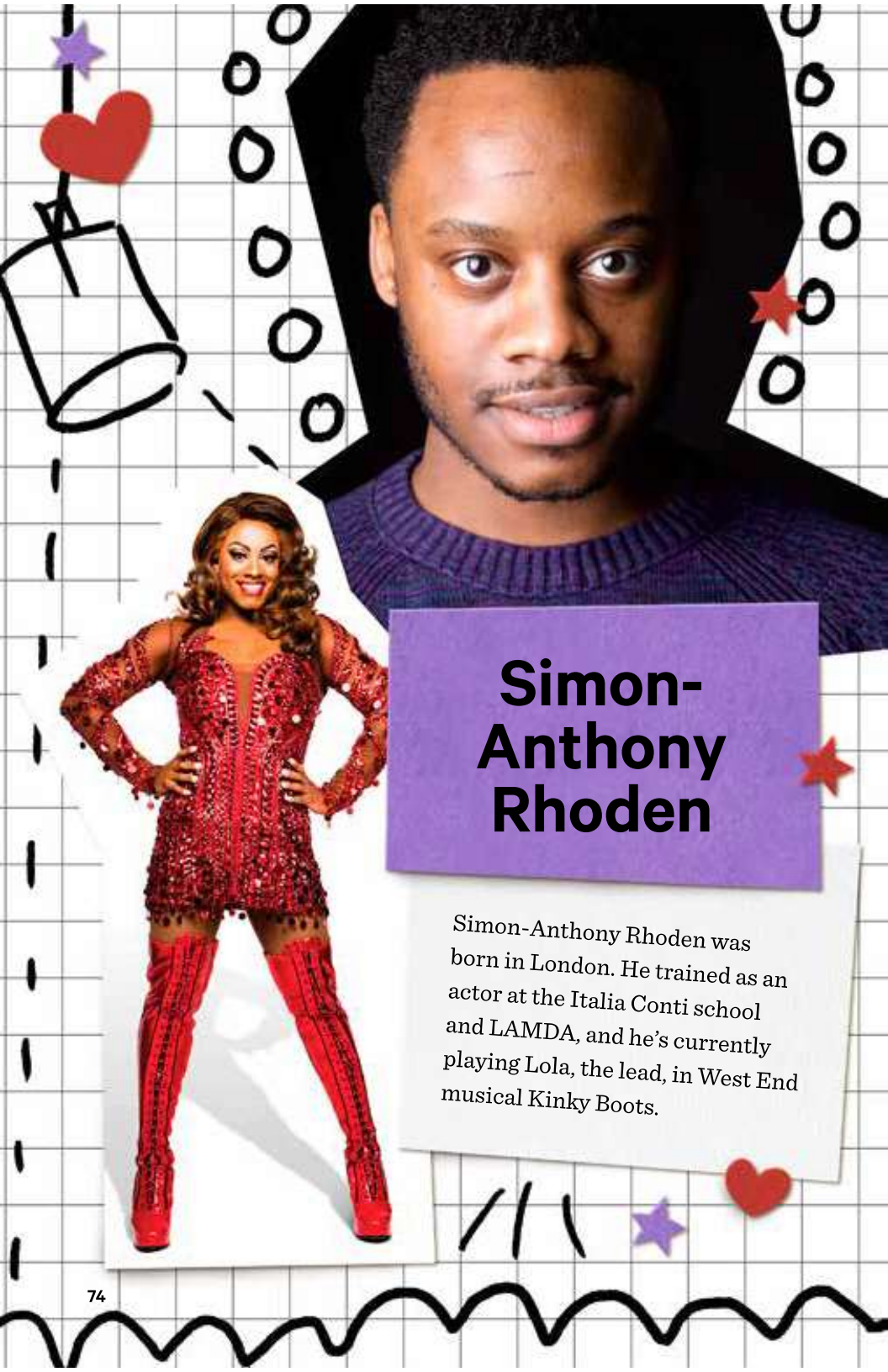
The nature of most belief systems means that they're pretty damn old, like REALLY old – about as ancient as *Drag Race* Season 1. As-



There are faith groups all over the world that open their arms to the LGBT+ community.

pects of a religion naturally change over time but the holy books stay the same. Some scriptures may lead you to believe that homosexuality is a sin, but with time, society changes and so does the way religious leaders interpret the meaning of holy texts. Whatever religion you are, you'll probably find a community that teaches love and acceptance for all. A quick Google search of your faith, location and the letters LGBT+ will bring up a list of wonderful faith organizations that may be the perfect fit for you.

There are always going to be homophobic, biphobic, transphobic people in the world, and some of them will use their religion as an excuse for their views. But if your faith is important to you, you can seek out a community where you are valued as an equal, where people love you and celebrate you for who you are.



Simon-Anthony Rhoden

Simon-Anthony Rhoden was born in London. He trained as an actor at the Italia Conti school and LAMDA, and he's currently playing Lola, the lead, in West End musical *Kinky Boots*.

SIMON-ANTHONY'S ADVICE TO HIS YOUNGER SELF

Growing up within the Caribbean culture where it just wasn't okay to be gay, I found it so difficult to be my authentic self. And so I would do anything to get people to like me – make jokes, run errands, compromise my happiness, all in order to distract from my big secret. By as I got older, I learned that people-pleasing had stunted my growth as a person and realized that, I wasn't really making my own decisions – I was doing things to appease others. There's nothing wrong with making other people happy, but only if it doesn't compromise your own happiness. I think it's important for young people, especially young people dealing with LGBTQ+ issues, to find their own voices and start experimenting with them as soon as they can. I've learned that not everyone is going to like me, regardless of my sexuality, and that's fine.

The advice I would give my 16-year-old self is "Be your most authentic self and make your own choices." As Oscar Wilde said: "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

FROM MY PARENTS TO YOURS

Coming out is pretty tough, I think we can all agree on that. We've usually had a long time to reflect on our feelings and identity before telling the ones we love who we really are.

When your family finds out you're queer, it can hit them like a ton of bricks and that's no surprise, really. After all, they are hearing the news for the first time and they are expected to get it and shower you with acceptance right away. In reality, they might need time to process the news and work on their perception of what it means to have an LGBTQ+ person in the family.

This chapter is written by my parents for your parents. I've asked them to answer the questions they get asked most often by parents who have just found out that their child is gay, bi or trans. My parents went through a long period of adjustment while trying to figure out how to accept and love me for who I am. They eventually realized that me being gay didn't actually change anything and that I was the same son as I had always been. The only difference was that I was now free to express myself without fear or shame and that they would be needed for many for Pride parades!

My kid just came out to me. What should I do?

MOM: It may feel like the child you brought into the world and reared with love has completely changed. They haven't. This is still your beautiful kid who needs your support and understanding – now more than ever before.

It has likely taken them a long, long time to come to a place where they are confident enough to share this news with you, so listen to them carefully. Without being too honest about your feelings, support them and let the news sink in before reacting too strongly.

It's okay to ask questions and to feel confused. Be respectful. Don't blame anyone for the news you've just heard and try to hear your child out as they answer.

Make sure your child has no doubt in their mind that you love them unconditionally and that you'll keep the news to yourself if they ask you to. Right now, your job is to let your child feel heard. This is a major moment in both your lives. Try to make it one that you'll both look back on with fond memories.

When you have time to yourself, allow the news to sink in and seek help or advice from family, friends, a therapist or an LGBT+ support group, many of which offer services to parents of newly "out" teens.

Did I do something wrong as a parent to make my child this way?

DAD: You haven't done anything wrong. I believed this myself for a while, too – that I hadn't put enough masculinity into him when he was a kid or that I had slipped up as a father in some way. This is not true.

Your child's sexuality is not a choice, and it's not influenced by how they were brought up or what they were exposed to. It's in their genetics, just as being heterosexual is in mine. It was there from before birth, just like their eye and hair colour.

Accept that your parenting – good or bad – had no affect on who your child is sexually attracted to. If anything, it's a compli-

ment to your parenting that your child has the bravery to confide in you. Don't let that bravery be for nothing. Show them love, and communicate your feelings carefully, so that you don't hurt them.

How can I support my child?

MOM: First and most importantly, be a listening ear for them. If you're the first parent they've told and they're not ready for the other parent to hear the news, then respect that. They will do it in their own time.

Seek out other parents (like us) who have been through the coming out journey. They may be distant family friends, work colleagues or people you've found through a local LGBT+ support group. They will make this experience feel less daunting and will likely give you tips on how to calmly and encouragingly support your child.

It's more important now than ever to shower your child with love. They will be extremely sensitive to anything you say or do in the weeks after they come out. This is normal! They will be

looking for a sign that they made the right decision in telling you. Assure them through regular verbal expressions of affection that they did the right thing. A few hugs and kisses won't go amiss (if you're anything like us)!

But what will our family, friends, neighbours think?

DAD: As my wife, Lorraine said to me when Riyadh came out: *"Sam, stop worrying about what other people think. This is your son, your blood. When you're on your deathbed thinking about what you have achieved in your life, it will be your children who are by your side kissing you and telling you that they love you. The only thing that matters is the four of us. Family first."*

Ultimately, who cares what anyone outside your family thinks? They will have to learn to love and accept your child, otherwise it's their loss. It may take time for those in your social or family circle to come around to the news, but that's their job, not yours, and certainly not your kid's.

Surely this is just a phase? Shouldn't help my child "see the light"?

MOM: I don't think your child would have made the difficult decision to come out if what they were feeling was a mere phase. This is something that they have been feeling and potentially struggling with silently for a very long time.

Do not try to change them or talk them out of it. This is not comparable to a discussion of what piercing or tattoo they want to get – their sexuality or gender identity is a deep, unchangeable aspect of who they are. Asking them to alter it would be like asking a person of colour to become white. It's impossible for them to change, and deeply offensive to ask them to.

Let time heal you, them and your relationship. Let this also be a chance for you to discover who your child really is, in a new, unfiltered and fearless way.

Think back to the way your

child was when they were young. You might remember hints that they were different. It'll probably become clear to you that they were queer right from the start.

I'm finding this news hard to handle. How can I get support without hurting my child's feelings?

DAD: As Lorraine said, time is an amazing healer and a way for you to get clarity on what really matters. Honestly, you'll look back and wonder what on Earth you were worried about.

Talking is what helped me figure it all out. Specifically, talking to another father who had two gay sons. Without judgement, he told me that my feelings and fears were exactly the same as the ones he'd experienced. I was able to ask all the difficult questions that were too sensitive to ask Riyadh directly. It helped a lot.

Is my child's life going to be different or difficult now that they're out of the closet and LGBT+?

MOM: Yes, their life is likely to be different but not necessarily in a bad way.

We always fear as parents that our children may be judged or ridiculed in some way. This may

happen, but at least now that you know, you'll be able to help, protect or listen to them if it happens. They're no longer fighting this battle on their own.

And things are going to change for you, too. You'll be able to see how enlightening, loving and fun the LGBT+ community is. This is something I now realize is the greatest gift I could have asked for. I am so blessed to have a gay son in my life. Because of him, our minds and hearts have been opened.



BEING AN ALLY

If you're reading this, you're probably a friend, family member or classmate of an LGBT+ person. First of all, thank you! You care enough to find out how you can support the lesbian, gay, bi, trans or queer person (or people) in your life.

Being an ally means more than watching a few episodes of *Will & Grace* with your gay bestie on a Saturday night while you exchange stories about hot guys on Instagram.

To be a true ally you have to consciously do your best to support not

just one LGBT+ person but an entire community by learning about their struggles, celebrating their triumphs and challenging homophobic or transphobic behaviour whenever you see it in person, in legislation or online (making sure you put your physical safety first at all times).

The queer community has made incredible leaps and bounds towards equality in recent years, but this couldn't have been achieved without army of allies rallying around and pushing for laws to change, for LGBT+ people to be elected, and for bigoted voices to be silenced with education and love. So what I'm saying is thanks, and we need you now more than ever.

Queer young people are still three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. Conservative leaders around the world are trying to roll back the clock on equality measures that were decades in the making, and homophobic hate crimes are steadily on the rise in major cities like London and New York.



How to be a good ally

- Become aware of the daily microaggressions faced by the LGBT+ community – people saying things like “That’s so gay!” or laughing at gay love scenes in movies for instance – and call it out when you see it happening
- Speak to your LGBT+ friends, family members and work colleagues about what bothers them most and what you could do to make things easier for them
- Get involved in protests for equal rights
- Attend pride marches with LGBT+ friends and socialize with them outside Pride season.
- Try to educate older members of your family about the LGBT+ community and why it’s important to support them
- Do the same with the young people you know, including your children. They are the next generation of allies and LGBT+ people. Teaching them to accept and love all people, no matter who they are or who they love, is an invaluable a life lesson.
- Support LGBT+ charities and organizations by volunteering, campaigning or fundraising. There’s a list of organizations in the Useful Contacts Section at the end of this book.

Being a queer ally

So you identify on the queer spectrum and want to make sure you are there for your LGBT+ brothers/sisters/siblings? That’s great!

You are in the special position of knowing exactly what it feels like to be a minority and what good and bad things can happen as a result of that. Remember that our community is only strong when we

are speaking as one, acting as one and constantly demanding equal treatment.

I think queer people have a duty to be allies. The queer community that we were born into desperately needs every one of us to speak up and push for positive change. That’s why it hurts me when I hear a gay man say he hates feminine gay men, or that it’s unnatural for two people of the same sex to get married or have children. Statements like this come from internalized homophobia, but they can cause so much harm to others in the community. It’s important to remember that, even within the queer community, some people have an easier time than others.

People at the intersection of race, disability, gender identity, sex and sexuality are the ones who need to be supported and shouted for the most. If you don’t understand what I mean, think about a black, disabled, transgender lesbian. She faces racism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia AND sexism. That’s a lot more than I have to deal with. Recognizing the privilege you have because of your race, sex, gender identity, etc is always a good first step.

If you don’t know where to start, turn to the Useful Contacts section and look up one of the brilliant LGBT+ organizations working in your area. See how you can get involved, and help make the world a better place for all of us!

Recognizing the privilege you have because of your race, sex, gender identity, etc is always a good first step.

MY FIRST PRIDE

The first time I found my community was at my first ever Pride in Dublin.

I was 16 and had lied to my parents about where I was going. My best friend and I headed into the city and found a sea of brightly coloured, loud and proud people. Thousands of them were smiling, hugging, kissing, dancing and having a great time without a care in the world. There was no judgement or fear in the air. We were strong together. This was a first for me and I was instantly addicted.

My friend and I marched nervously with the crowds through the streets of the capital before stopping at a public park for a finale show and speeches by key LGBT+ figures. It felt as though the march was a religious pilgrimage and this was the climax – like the gay pope was about to arrive and bless us with her glittering homo glory.

I sat and watched as a famous drag queen named Panti Bliss took the stage to a thunderous applause. In an impassioned speech that would have rivalled Martin Luther King, she told

There was no judgement or fear in the air. We were strong together.



us what the word “community” meant. I sat there, a little baby gay, tears rolling down my face. I felt part of something bigger than me. I felt like I mattered to these people and they mattered to me, and for the first time in my life I felt **proud**.

I somehow found an ancient grainy recording of the speech online and these were Panti’s exact words.

“We are gathered here today to celebrate who we are and how far we have come. Today we stand here as a community, strong, powerful, vibrant and PROUD!

We have much to feel proud of ourselves about today, but at the same time, I want more! I will continue to want more until each and every one of us, from the butchest lesbian to the femmiest gay can walk the streets of this city, any street, any hour of the day or night, free from the fear of harassment or intimidation. I want MORE!

I will continue to want more until this state recognizes our relationships under the law; not just accepts our relationships but cherishes our relationships as they cherish the relationships of our heterosexual brothers and sisters.

These things that we want are not gay rights, because the truth is, there’s no such thing as gay rights, there are only RIGHTS.”

(I’m not crying, you are, leave me alone.)

What does the LGBT+ community mean to you?

I asked my Twitter followers what the LGBT+ community means to them. Here are some of the Tweets I received.

A usually/hopefully safe and non-judgemental space/group of people where you can talk openly and unashamedly about being LGBT+ and your experiences, and find support. I’ve found my community online, mostly, but also within my IRL friendship groups.

As a person living in rural Ireland, my community are my queer friends. We hold each other up and make each other laugh and just understand things about one another that nobody else would.

The queer community means knowing you’re not alone. Knowing there are others like you, and that they’re doing okay. It’s a place to discover role models, connect and enjoy queer culture. I found my community on the internet first and in real life later.

To me, community means everyone being there for each other, supporting one another and having fun. It’s having somewhere to go for advice or help, and having a large support network of people who understand you. It’s somewhere to go for help, comfort or validation. It’s fantastic and has helped me lots.

It’s the chosen family we sometimes love more than our own family. Yes, we have certainly fought our battles but in the end we are all rooting for each other and have a genuine love for one another.



Rory O'Neill is an activist, writer, bar owner and performer. He performs as Panti Bliss, Ireland's foremost drag queen.

Rory O'Neill



YES!



RORY'S ADVICE TO HIS YOUNGER SELF

Dear 16-year-old me,

I know. Grown ups are annoying – always telling you that things aren't as bad as you think and that one day you'll look back and blah blah blah. And you're right. We are annoying, because what use is "Blah blah blah, one day" to you now? Not much, I'm afraid. And what's worse is, here I am about to do the "Blah blah" thing to you and I can only imagine how annoying it is to find out that you've become one of those annoying adults yourself. Ugh! But, there you go. Life is weird.

*And you'd know, because, well, you're kinda weird. Yes you are! And you know it. But here's the really weird bit: being weird is a **good** thing! I promise. You'll just have to trust me on that. So try not to worry or stress too much about the things that make you feel awkward and different and out-of-place at the moment, because (and again you'll just have to trust me on this) over time those same things will become the **very** things that make you special and unique, and will become the very things that I, and others, will come to value and cherish most about you. And you can't change who you are even if you want to, so be you – because there is no one else like you. You have abilities and talents that are unique to you, and they are valuable and important. And one day, (blah blah blah 😊), people will see that. You have a lot to offer.*

Oh, and while I have you: your spots will clear up and you are hotter than you think you are. I swear! Turns out that youth is attractive in itself. I know! Weird, right? But it's true, so start hitting on hotter guys.

x Old Rory